

Grass-Fed Basics

by Jo Robinson

Back to Pasture. Since the late 1990s, a growing number of ranchers have stopped sending their animals to the feedlots to be fattened on grain, soy and other supplements. Instead, they are keeping their animals home on the range where they forage on pasture, their native diet. These new-age ranchers do not treat their livestock with hormones or feed them growth-promoting additives. As a result, the animals grow at a natural pace. For these reasons and more, grass-fed animals live low-stress lives and are so healthy there is no reason to treat them with antibiotics or other drugs.

More Nutritious. A major benefit of raising animals on pasture is that their products are healthier for you. For example, compared with feedlot meat, meat from grass-fed beef, bison, lamb and goats has less total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and calories. It also has more vitamin E, beta-carotene, vitamin C, and a number of health-promoting fats, including omega-3 fatty acids and “conjugated linoleic acid,” or CLA. Read more about the nutritional benefits of raising animals on pasture.

The Art and Science of Grassfarming. Raising animals on pasture requires more knowledge and skill than sending them to a feedlot. For example, in order for grass-fed beef to be succulent and tender, the cattle need to forage on high-quality grasses and legumes, especially in the months prior to slaughter. Providing this nutritious and natural diet requires healthy soil and careful pasture management so that the plants are maintained at an optimal stage of growth. Because high-quality pasture is the key to high-quality animal products, many pasture-based ranchers refer to themselves as “grassfarmers” rather than “ranchers.” They raise great grass; the animals do all the rest.

Factory Farming. Raising animals on pasture is dramatically different from the status quo. Virtually all the meat, eggs, and dairy products that you find in the supermarket come from animals raised in confinement in large facilities called CAFOs or “Confined Animal Feeding Operations.” These highly mechanized operations provide a year-round supply of food at a reasonable price. Although the food is cheap and convenient, there is growing recognition that factory farming creates a host of problems, including:

- Animal stress and abuse
- Air, land, and water pollution
- The unnecessary use of hormones, antibiotics, and other drugs
- Low-paid, stressful farm work
- The loss of small family farms

- Food with less nutritional value.

Unnatural Diets. Animals raised in factory farms are given diets designed to boost their productivity and lower costs. The main ingredients are genetically modified grain and soy that are kept at artificially low prices by government subsidies. To further cut costs, the feed may also contain “by-product feedstuff” such as municipal garbage, stale pastry, chicken feathers, and candy. Until 1997, U.S. cattle were also being fed meat that had been trimmed from other cattle, in effect turning herbivores into carnivores. This unnatural practice is believed to be the underlying cause of BSE or “mad cow disease.”

Animal Stress. A high-grain diet can cause physical problems for ruminants—cud-chewing animals such as cattle, dairy cows, goats, bison, and sheep. Ruminants are designed to eat fibrous grasses, plants, and shrubs—not starchy, low-fiber grain. When they are switched from pasture to grain, they can become afflicted with a number of disorders, including a common but painful condition called “subacute acidosis.” Cattle with subacute acidosis kick at their bellies, go off their feed, and eat dirt. To prevent more serious and sometimes fatal reactions, the animals are given chemical additives along with a constant, low-level dose of antibiotics. Some of these antibiotics are the same ones used in human medicine. When medications are overused in the feedlots, bacteria become resistant to them. When people become infected with these new, disease-resistant bacteria, there are fewer medications available to treat them.

Caged Pigs, Chickens, Ducks and Geese. Most of the nation’s chickens, turkeys, and pigs are also being raised in confinement. Typically, they suffer an even worse fate than the grazing animals. Tightly packed into cages, sheds, or pens, they cannot practice their normal behaviors, such as rooting, grazing, and roosting. Laying hens are crowded into cages that are so small that there is not enough room for all of the birds to sit down at one time. An added insult is that they cannot escape the stench of their own manure. Meat and eggs from these animals are lower in a number of key vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids.

Environmental Degradation. When animals are raised in feedlots or cages, they deposit large amounts of manure in a small amount of space. The manure must be collected and transported away from the area, an expensive proposition. To cut costs, it is dumped as close to the feedlot as possible. As a result, the surrounding soil is overloaded with nutrients, which can cause ground and water pollution. When animals are raised outdoors on pasture, their manure is spread over a wide area of land, making it a welcome source of organic fertilizer, not a “waste management problem.” Read more about the environmental differences between factory farming and grass-based production.

The Healthiest Choice. When you choose to eat meat, eggs, and dairy products from animals raised on pasture, you are improving the welfare of the animals, helping to put an end to environmental degradation, helping small-scale ranchers and farmers make a living from the land, helping to sustain rural communities, and giving your family the healthiest possible food. It's a win-win-win-win situation.